

## Introduction

‘The stronger regionalism is, the weaker nationalism is. A man’s feelings have limits, if he loves this he cannot love that. If we Chinese are extremely attached to our native regions, then we naturally have great difficulty in recognising the nation that stands above the region. We only know that we are from such and such a province, such and such a *hsien*, we give very little thought to the fact that we are Chinese [an identity], transcending the world of the province or *hsien*. In our work we are only concerned with advancing our region, and do not give thought to the interests of the nation. While the whole country is divided up along these provincial, *hsien* and *hsiang* lines [what hope is there] of easily producing a common national viewpoint? If we look at the government of China, we can understand the influence of regional colouring. Any Chihli Clique, Anhwei Clique, Fengtien Clique, even the proposals for federal autonomy, are all the natural manifestations of developed regionalism. When warlords and politicians see this kind of psychology, they have no qualms about using regionalism to pull together their strength. When ordinary people have drunk the poison of this kind of psychology, they also follow behind, and become their tools.’ Up to the Central Government, down to local government, virtually every *yamen* has become a *t’ung-hsiang hui-kuan* [regional association].”

Wang Tsao-shih’s impassioned denunciation of regionalism skates around a crucial question in the understanding of the Chinese polity: is China a single entity, or is it both a collection of regions and a nation? Wang ignores the possibility that it could be the latter; he sees the nation and the region as antagonists, as mutually incompatible, the one good the other evil, negative regionalism working against positive nationalism. By ignoring the question, he is following an accepted pattern, Chinese and Western, traditional and modern, of regarding China as ‘the whole China’, of defining topics by discipline or by period, but regarding China

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always as a homogeneous entity. The region is relegated to a lowly position, usually an irritant, sometimes a threat to the larger polity. The idea that China could be two things, both a high culture or nation and a collection of regions is unthinkable.

And yet in a polity as large as China, regional distinctions are enormous. The geographical and climatic diversity of China produces wide variations in food, dialect and social custom.<sup>2</sup> In a deeply-rooted society, where physical mobility is limited, attachment to a region and affection for it is natural. The region is a small cosy world within the larger world of China. Regionalism, as a strong sense of local identity and local integration, founded on common cultural ties, clearly exists, and provides local cohesion and a stability which can survive turbulence in the larger polity.

Why then is it seen as a threat? The answer lies in the function of regionalism. As a cultural manifestation alone, it is not a threat. Cultural regionalism, distinction of cuisine, of social customs, does not threaten the larger polity, as Chinese dialects do not threaten the written language. But when cultural regionalism slips over into political regionalism, when regional origins determine political behaviour, it can become a threat, of the kind that Wang rails against.

A high degree of political regionalism may threaten the cohesiveness of the nation, if it has reached a point where it amounts to local nationalism, to a desire to separate from the larger nation. Welsh nationalism, Basque nationalism, French-Canadian nationalism are expressions, in one region of a larger nation, of a sense of complete distinctiveness. They are also expressions of a separate historical identity, upon which they draw to justify their desire for separation. These nationalist regions have once been independent, they have been incorporated by force into the larger polity. Cultural distinctions are used to reinforce a sense of political separateness; the Welsh speak Welsh, wear leeks, hold eisteddfods to show how completely different from the English they are. The nationalism of the larger nation becomes the enemy, regionalism is nationalism-in-miniature.

All this is a long way from the Chinese experience of regionalism. Except in the Inner Asian frontier regions, the absence of major historical experiences of regional independence which preceded incorporation into the Chinese state has meant that regionalism as a desire for secession, for a return to a lost independence, has seldom been a problem, and that regionalism is not totally antagonistic to the state, since it does not threaten its fragmentation. But if this extreme version is absent, can regionalism, in either cultural or political manifestations, threaten the state in less drastic ways?

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So powerful were the ties of cultural regionalism in traditional China that they could only be prevented from finding political expression within the organs of Central Government by artificial means. The development of 'regional nepotism' was aborted through rigorously observed laws of avoidance, through setting regional quotas for examination candidates, through distribution of Central funds by regional allotments.

These devices amounted to checking the political manifestations of cultural regionalism; they were not attempts to deal with fully fledged political regionalism. When that emerged, as it did periodically in Chinese history, it was a sign that the Central authority was waning, that a centrifugal process was under way, which the existing authority could not halt.

Did this latter kind of regionalism threaten the state in an absolute way? Wang assumes that it did. This study will try to show that it did not, that regionalism and nationalism were not necessarily antagonistic, that they could co-exist. We shall look at the political workings of regionalism in a period of extreme devolution of Central authority, the 1920s and 1930s, and in a province on the edge of China, Kwangsi. Kwangsi under the Kwangsi Clique represents regionalism in its most extreme form, both by period and place. There is a danger that Kwangsi regionalism is such an extreme phenomenon that it is atypical of other regions. There are very few studies of the regionalism of areas closer to the centre of China, which could confirm this danger; by default, we can only hope that it represents an extreme case of a common phenomenon.

We shall discuss the nature of regions, the constituency of regionalism, the cultural, political and economic workings of regionalism. We shall look at the relationship between region and nation, at the inter-action of the two elements within the Chinese polity. We shall examine the connection between regionalism and militarism, a crucial combination in Republican China. We shall use the term 'regionalism' fairly loosely, simply to mean a sense of regional identity. Regionalism in English translates a whole series of Chinese terms – *ti-fang kuan-nien*, *ti-yü kuan-nien*, *hsiao-ch'ün kuan-nien*, *chi-kuan kuan-nien*, *ti-fang chu-i*, *t'ung-hsiang kuan-nien* – which suggest subtle variations which cannot be translated into English, but which all imply attachment to a region and a sense of solidarity with natives of the same region. Our definition of regionalism will emerge from an attempt to define its various aspects, not in the form of a neat, dictionary-style definition.

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### WHAT IS A REGION?

Before we can discuss regionalism, we have to define the region, a task less simple than it seems at first sight. It is usually assumed that a region, in China, is a province; region and province are often used as synonyms. (Regionalism and provincialism are not, since provincialism, especially in English, carries strongly derogatory connotations. Provincialism is associated with benighted areas on the fringes of the civilised world, inhabited by provincial universities, provincial towns and provincial newspapers, all drab, parochial, gauche and second-rate. Regionalism is a neutral term.) Jean Chesneaux describes the Chinese provinces as distinct, natural regions, characterised by 'their geographical, political, sociological and economic cohesion'.<sup>3</sup> His description states in concrete form the common assumption that the provinces are the natural units of division within China, are natural regions.

This is not an unjustified assumption. The degree of geographical definition of provinces is high, especially in south China: most provincial boundaries fall on mountain ranges, on lakes or on rivers. The provinces are units of division for political and cultural loyalties which stress the region rather than the totality. Each province has its stereotype – the fiery Hunanese, the rats of Szechwan, the deceitful people of Hupei – all used of course by people of other provinces, but as a means of bolstering their own sense of provincial identity. 'Membership' in a province is an honour, something acquired only by birth, and not even by one's own birth; several generations of residence are required before one can call oneself a provincial native. Cemented by such loyalties, the regionalism of the province is a potent phenomenon, whether as cultural regionalism or as political regionalism.

But there are other types of regionalism, which make an absolute identification of region with province impossible. These regions are not so conveniently defined as are provinces, their cohesive influence operates less consistently, but can still be very strong.

### MULTI-PROVINCE REGIONS

These regions occur both naturally, as geographical phenomena, and artificially, as functions of administrative practice. The most important are both – natural regions, such as Kwangtung–Kwangsi, Hunan–Hupei, Szechwan–Yunnan–Kweichow – which were traditionally administered as joint entities, under a governor-general. The sense of regionalism generated in these regions was not overwhelming; it never precluded

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intra-regional hostility (nor did the regionalism of the province prevent hostility within the province). But in a specific context, of contact between the region and the larger world, it was an important force. Merchants, students and travellers from the region felt close ties to each other when they were outside the region. They frequently maintained joint *hui-kuan* (regional associations, *Landsmannschaften*); in a city where the activities of the natives of a single province were not important enough to justify an independent *hui-kuan*, there might be establishments of San-chiang (Kiangsu, Anhwei, Kiangsi, Chekiang), Liang-Kuang (Kwangtung and Kwangsi), Liang-Hu (Hunan and Hupei), etc.<sup>4</sup> These organisations operated as a focus of fellow-regional feeling, as a way of helping fellow-regionalists who might otherwise be isolated in the wide world.

In confrontations with the Central Government, the large region could exert a powerful integrative influence. Kwangsi and Kwangtung frequently fought each other, but they also stood side by side against the Centre. An external stimulus was needed to generate a feeling of regionalism, but the feeling was latent. Artificial large regionalism, the kind of conglomerations created by militarists in the twentieth century, could not generate such an identity. The 'Kwangsi Empire' of 1928–9 was made up of a string of provinces from Kwangsi to Peking, but it was nothing more than that – a string of provinces held together only by the military might of the Kwangsi Clique, not by any natural ties, and it was easily snapped.

## INTRA-PROVINCIAL REGIONS

However great the homogeneity of a province, it is no guarantee against the existence of distinctions within the province which amount to sub-regions. In Kwangsi, for example, there were ethnic distinctions, between tribal peoples and Han Chinese, between local natives and Hakka immigrants; there were distinctions of levels of cultural sophistication, as between residents of the provincial capital and backwoodsmen; there were geographical distinctions, between the plain of the southeast and the hills of the north and west; there were linguistic distinctions, as between the Mandarin speakers of the northeast and the Cantonese speakers of the south. All these distinctions could be submerged in a larger sense of provincial identity in a specific political or personal context: when the province saw itself in relation to other provinces, its natives felt a sense of provincial regionalism; when they were outside the province, they felt it too. But when the province was exclusively concerned with itself, the sub-regions became important; within the province a man was a Wuchow native or a Kweilin native.

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Such loyalties had an important role to play in the formation of groupings within provincial affairs.

### BORDER-ZONE REGIONS

The areas where provinces meet often constitute distinct regions. Borders are seldom lines of absolute demarcation; the existence of a border does not preclude the existence of a commonality of social and political attitudes on both sides. Border zones tend to be isolated and poverty-stricken, their inhabitants are thrown together against the more prosperous inhabitants of the central areas of both provinces. Border zones were often less amenable to government control than inner-provincial areas; they were often the locus of rebellion, the haunt of rebels and bandits – a fact which the Communists used to their advantage when they set up their base areas in border zones during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Even where the border zones were not isolated, as with the Kwangtung–Kwangsi border, there were tight links across the border; the population on either side virtually ignored the border. Smuggling, of salt, opium, weapons, was a prime occupation for many border-zone residents; it demanded a secrecy and a mutual trust which created powerful links. In a specific context, such links could determine political behaviour. When, for example, two provinces were at war, the border regions would try to take themselves out of the hostilities.

Other types of region can be defined: dialect regions, agricultural regions, trade regions, economic regions. Economic regions are enormously important in so far as the organisation of Chinese trade and commerce is concerned; they frequently correspond to multi-province regions, centred around a major commercial city – the Canton region, which includes Kwangtung and Kwangsi, the Wuhan region, which includes Hunan and Hupei – but they can be smaller areas, the marketing area surrounding a single *hsien*. As an abstraction, one may even define an ideal region, if one is a bold political scientist: ‘As an objective entity and as a heuristic device for research, the ideal region will always be the composite region in which economic, political and cultural identity is evident.’<sup>5</sup> But none of these regions has an independent political role to play, as do the regions we have defined above (though they may operate in supportive roles for political regionalism). Since we are concerned with the political workings of regionalism, we shall not discuss them in detail.

The definition of so many types of regionalism might suggest a hideous confusion of loyalties; in fact, none of the four main types we have defined is antagonistic; each comes into operation in a specific

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context, usually externally defined. They are part of a ladder of loyalties, starting with the family, and working up to the nation; any one can be called into play, as political regionalism, when a larger situation demands it; when the state is losing authority, large regionalism becomes important; when the state has collapsed, provincial regionalism is important; when two provinces are fighting, border zone regionalism emerges; when a province itself is disturbed, intra-provincial regionalism exerts itself. In all these extreme situations, existing loyalties are brought into play, for self-protection, as a retreat from confusion to the security of the known group. Regionalism responds to situations; the external situation decides which form is called for, not the regionalism itself. From a system of layered loyalties is selected the one which fits the situation best.

## THE CONSTITUENCY OF REGIONALISM

We have talked as if the region, however defined, was a homogeneous entity, founded on a sense of common regional identity. But of course it was not; regionalism had its own form of class distinction. In traditional China, there were groups of people and institutions which transcended the region, whose identity was universal, unconscious of the region. The imperial administration was staffed by the Confucian elite, by men who lived away from their native places; of all bureaucratic regulations, the laws of avoidance were among the most strictly observed. The gentry, which administered the localities of China, shared the universalist identity of the scholar-bureaucrats, and knew their regions only to the extent that their administrative tasks demanded; they were in the regions, but not of them. Bureaucrats might call on regional ties in the choice of assistants and protégés, but they did this not because they felt themselves to be regionalists, but because they were more at ease with men from their native places.

For the mass of Chinese, however, the universal culture of Confucianism was a distant world. For them, the region – and even below that the locality, the *hsien* – was the major focus of identification. For the little people, the humble, the uneducated, the poor, the horizons of the region were the end of the real world. The culturalism of the elite was a dimly perceived, almost mystical vision. For them, travel beyond the region was seldom possible; if it was, the experience was unsettling and fearful. The twenty-five-year-old Li Tsung-jen was scared almost witless by a steam engine, when he emerged for the first time from the backwoods of Kwangsi into developed Kwangtung.<sup>6</sup> Even those who did travel outside their native regions found the outside world



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rather hostile, and stayed close together in *hui-kuan*; personal contacts were formed on the basis of common regional origin.<sup>7</sup> Only the members of the gilded elite felt really comfortable beyond the region – and they never saw the region.

Both in traditional and modern China, there are what amount to crude class lines in the development of regional identity. The mass does not think above the region, if it thinks that high; regionalism when used as a political tool of mass mobilisation tends to raise sights, not lower them – as the leaders of the Kwangsi Clique found in the 1930s when they used regionalism to unify the province. The constituency of regionalism is the mass, not the elite, who are drawn to the region only in times of Central (culturalist or nationalist) crisis.

### REGIONALISM AS A POLITICAL FORCE

If regionalism was always present in traditional China, it was usually unimportant in political terms. It existed as a continuum, as a warm, comfortable identity, an underlying current to the universalist order, which it could not threaten because it did not impinge upon the functioning of the centralised political process. Regionalism was incoherent and ill formulated, incapable of competing with the self-confident, articulate universalism of the Confucian order. To the extent that it existed, it provided a potential retreat, a fall-back position. When the Centre could not hold, there was the region to resort to, a *faute de mieux*, but a real one nonetheless. When the Centre weakened, at the end of dynasties, the centrifugal forces created by Central weakness expressed themselves as regionalism, raised from incoherency to a political force, not fighting against the Centre, but providing a substitute for it.

Modern Chinese historians, both Communist and Kuomintang, have regarded regionalism as a negative, destructive force, as the creator of a weak and divided China. They have blamed it in part for China's sufferings at the hands of foreigners, and have seen it as an impediment to nationalism. In fact, it is not absurd to see its operation in almost a reverse light, to see regionalism as the sinews which held China together. If regionalism was the fall-back position, the response to Central weakness, it still allowed China to divide into pre-determined parts, without fragmenting arbitrarily. It did this because its proponents seldom saw it as more than a bridging phenomenon; they operated on the assumption that the Centre would reassert itself, and that regionalism as a political force would submit gracefully to the reborn Centre. It held the fort for the Centre, it provided a continuity between the order that had died and the new one which would emerge.



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This was the tacit, unformulated definition of regionalism as a political force which the modern holders of regional power inherited. The case is deliberately over-stated. There are many regionalists in whom such 'regional altruism' was manifestly lacking – crass, self-seeking warlords who considered neither the welfare of the region nor the nation. But in others, the sense of nation, and of region serving it, was strong enough to exercise a determinant influence on their actions.

## THE REGIONALISTS

Who were the people who held political power as regionalists, specifically in the late Ch'ing and early Republic? They were seldom members of the elite, who might manipulate regional loyalties to serve the declining Centre, but who stopped short of setting themselves up as regional rulers, detached from the Centre. The regionalists were new men, soldiers who became increasingly powerful as the civil order declined; civilians lacked the desire or the ability to seize regional power. The late Ch'ing scholar-bureaucrats served only the universalist order; their successors, the intellectuals of the early Republic, inherited from them the assumption that political positions must be national in scale, self-conscious, coherent and assiduously cultivated. Regionalist attachments could never aspire to such heights; they and their proponents were unsophisticated, incoherent, unsystematic. They were not susceptible to organisation and refinement, their strength lay in their ability to bind without making demands for the adoption of specific political positions. When they were articulated, they ran the danger of becoming artificial and bogus, a form of play acting.<sup>8</sup> Expressions of regional 'racism', like the following poem, are amusing rather than deeply moving; they suggest that though the authors may hope to make political capital for the region out of such declarations, they also have their tongues in their cheeks.

'The Kwangsi scenery is beautiful,  
 Revolution is rooted there.  
 First there was Shih Ta-k'ai,  
 Then there was Li Hsiu-ch'eng.  
 Talking of the heroes of today,  
 We put forward first Li Tsung-jen.  
 We throw the silken ball, waiting for  
 a catcher, to the Kwangsi men.'<sup>9</sup>

The intellectuals and politicians of the early Republic recognised that regionalism could never be anything more than a stop-gap, that it existed below the level of philosophical discourse. They might use it as

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a temporary convenience – Sun Yat-sen played on fellow-Cantonese feeling to establish himself in Canton – but they despised it. So, too, in a quirkish way did the holders of regional power; they might use regionalism, but they could never take it as a supreme goal. Regional militarists sought national titles, they sought higher sanction for their regional independence. They fought wars to protect the constitution (*hu-fa*), to protect the country (*hu-kuo*). They spoke incessantly of national unity, they held reunification conferences, they struggled for Peking, the ‘national’ capital. They applied to the incumbent ruler of Peking for approval of the titles they gave themselves. Lu Jung-t’ing, the first ruler of Kwangsi after the establishment of the Republic, assiduously requested Peking’s confirmation of decisions which he in fact took quite independently. Absolute regional separatism was unknown, secession from China unthinkable. Lord Beresford might speak of the ‘break-up of China’, the proponents of regionalism never. A well-informed foreign resident might imagine that ‘logically, China must become a loose federation of autonomous regions’<sup>10</sup> but this prescription went far beyond the ambitions of even the most extreme expression of regional devolution, the Federalist Movement of the early 1920s.

The sense of China as a single entity never lost its potency, even among the holders of regional power. Of the two dominant groups of political figures in the early Republic, the elitist intellectuals talked of the nation and fought vainly for it, while the regional militarists protected their regions, with the thought of the nation somewhere in the back of their minds.

### REGIONALISM AND MILITARISM

If we say that the major proponents of regionalism as a political force were militarists, we must discuss the relationship between regionalism and militarism. The two phenomena depended on each other, and fed off each other. Military control was essential for regional independence, the region provided a locus for military independence. Once the civil order was gone, only military control was available to dominate a region and its income.

In its simplest lines, militarism means a dependence on military might for the maintenance of control; it means the subordination of civil organs to the military; it demands an economic organisation geared to military needs; it implies an authoritarian attitude towards the civilian population, and a deep suspicion of popular political organisation. It may serve a higher ideology – Fascism, *la gloire de la France* – but it may